The Voynich Manuscript: Folio 78v and the Iconographic Lineage from the Kingdom of Dali

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Abstract
This article presents a comparative iconographic analysis of a healing figure in the Voynich Manuscript (Folio 78v) and a Buddha figure embedded in a crown worn by Guan Yin in a statue originating from the Kingdom of Dali (Yunnan, China). Contrary to fixed Buddhist canonical rules, this figure in the manuscript reflects the flexible, syncretic healing iconography of the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition localized through the Bai-Dali cultural lens.

Keywords
Bai, Dali, Yunnan, China, Tibet, Sowa Rigpa, Vajrayana Buddhism, Buddhism, Ming Dynasty, healing, medicine, anthropology, linguistics, iconography, Buddha, Medicine Buddha

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Introduction

Folio 78v of the Voynich Manuscript presents a striking image: a central figure with a perfectly rounded, spherical head, seated in a mirrored mudra posture - the right hand reaching downward and the left hand raised. At first glance, this image might resemble traditional depictions of Shakyamuni Buddha (Gautama), yet upon further investigation, it becomes evident that the figure shares more in common with localized depictions of the Medicine Buddha as seen in certain Buddhist sculpture traditions in Yunnan province, China, specifically within the Kingdom of Dali.

This article connects this Voynich figure to a Dali-region statue of Guan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, which prominently features a spherical-headed Buddha figure embedded in her crown. This luminous orb-headed form mirrors the central celestial figure on 78v in both posture and symbolic purpose. Through this comparison, it becomes possible to link the Voynich Manuscript's healing doctrine, cosmic symbolism, and female-centered oil rituals to a hybrid iconographic and medicinal system rooted in Tibetan Sowa Rigpa but visualized through the Bai culture of the Dali Kingdom.

The Mudra

In the Voynich Manuscript, Folio 78v places this figure amidst women involved in oil-based medical preparation, pressing olive oil from sacred plants[1]. The mudra appears not as a declaration of enlightenment, but as an invocation of the earth's power in supporting divine healing. In this reinterpretation, the downward hand becomes an anchoring of divine medicine into the earthly plane, and the raised hand offers cosmic blessing to the oil-based electuaries being prepared.

Figure 1 (folio 78v)

The right-hand-down, left-hand-up posture is a known Buddhist gesture called the Bhumisparsha mudra, or "taking the earth as witness." In its original context, this mudra symbolizes the moment Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree, calling the earth to witness his awakening (*The Sutra*, 2020).

As scholar Harry Leong (2020) notes, this mudra is not fixed to Shakyamuni alone. In Tibetan traditions, the Medicine Buddha may also be depicted with the Bhumisparsha mudra, or may hold the myrobalan stem (*terminalia sp.)* instead of forming any mudra at all. This reflects ritual flexibility, allowing visual conventions to adapt to healing, caelestial, or agricultural meanings depending on local context.

The Spherical Head and the Dali Statue

One of the most defining features of the Voynich figure on 78v is its perfectly spherical head[2], devoid of typical facial features or ornate crowns. This visual form, though rare, finds a compelling match in the statues of Guan Yin from the Kingdom of Dali[3], in which a spherical-headed Buddha figure is seated in the crown of the Bodhisattva[4].

Figure 2 (folio 78v detail)

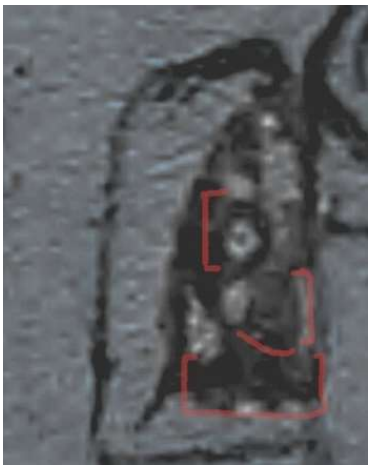

Figure 3

Figure 4 (Buddha detail)

While Buddhist sculpture in India and Tibet tends toward complex iconography and facial expression, the Dali region's Bai-influenced visual language simplifies the figure to emphasize essence over identity. The sphere becomes a symbol of totality, clarity, or cosmic unity. In the Voynich Manuscript, this aligns perfectly with the role of the central figure as a conduit between heaven, healing, and the earthly oils being pressed by women in ritual labor.

Visual and Doctrinal Implications

This match affirms several core points in this research's prior hypothesis:

1. The healing system is Tibetan Sowa Rigpa, based on humors, elixirs, sideral movement, and plant-oil medicines.
2. The artistic encoding is regionally Bai, adapting Tibetan motifs into local architectural and symbolic forms.
3. Folio 78v confirms the fusion of sacred healing labor, divine authority, and astro-botanical medicine into a single visual act.
4. The spherical-headed Buddha with mirrored mudra stands as the manuscript's embodiment of caelestial-curative authority - not Gautama Buddha, but the Medicine Buddha localized to the Dali worldview.

Conclusion

The appearance of the spherical-headed, mirrored-mudra Buddha figure in both the Voynich Manuscript (Folio 78v) and in the crown of a rare gilt Guan Yin statue from the Dali Kingdom affirms a unique visual tradition that fuses Sowa Rigpa medicine, Vajrayana cosmology, and Bai material culture. This discovery not only anchors the Voynich figure geographically but also recontextualizes its mudra and form as components of a deeply intentional curative system. This is not artistic coincidence; it is an secret liturgical diagram, one in which the healing forces of heaven, the labor of women, and the symbolic role of the Buddha converge.

References

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Figures 3 and 4 Image source: *The Bodhisattva Guanyin* (late 9th Century). Retrieved from https://art.thewalters.org/images/art/PS1_54.1345_Fnt_DD_T12.jpg

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***Note**: This article complements recent findings in the author's ongoing Voynich research and builds upon the architectural and medicinal parallels of the Tibetan Sowa Rigpa and Vajrayana Buddhism within the Bai region of Dali.*

Disclosure Statement
The author declares that she has no relevant or material financial interests that relate to the research described in this paper. There is also no association or affiliation with any academic institution.

Data Sharing Statement
Data will be available on request.

General AI Use Statement
OpenAI ChatGPT 4.0 was used to organize material for conciseness.

Biographical Note
The author is from the Carolinas and has had the privilege of growing up overseas in Panama. She has a long-time love of cultural anthropology, ethnography, linguistics, and archaeology. She also has a background in security, IT, and enjoys building computers. She is a single mother, cancer survivor, abuse and assault survivor, and owns a small business. She is passionate about combatting the following: human trafficking, smuggling, child exploitation, domestic violence, public and private corruption, and perverse social deviance. She currently possesses an associate's degree in liberal arts and will graduate in 2025 with a bachelor's degree. A master's in anthropology is on the horizon. BH.

Supplemental Material: https://www.youtube.com/@TheVoynichManuscriptCompendium

This update reflects ongoing discoveries made after the submission of my book manuscript and grant application. It should be read as a complementary refinement.